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# News Release



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## **COSTS OF CONSERVATION ACTIONS FOR FISH SLOUGH MILK-VETCH RELEASED**

### **Public comment period reopened on proposed critical habitat**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) today released a draft analysis that estimates costs associated with the conservation of the Fish Slough milk-vetch (*Astragalus lentiginosus* var. *piscinensis*), a plant found only in a desert wetland oasis in Inyo and Mono counties.

Between 1998 – when the milk-vetch was listed as a threatened species – and the final critical habitat designation in 2005, costs for the conservation of the species are estimated between \$749,000 and \$808,000. From 2005 to 2025, costs for the species' conservation are estimated between \$946,000 and \$978,000.

The Service is accepting public comment on the proposed designation of critical habitat for the Fish Slough milk-vetch and the draft economic analysis until January 27, 2005. The draft economic analysis and proposed rule can be downloaded from: <http://ventura.fws.gov/> under "Information & Education."

The Service proposed 8,490 acres as critical habitat for the Fish Slough milk-vetch in June of this year. Land managed by the federal Bureau of Land Management accounts for 5,401 acres under consideration for critical habitat, while the city of Los Angeles owns 2,923 acres. The remaining 166 acres are State-owned lands.

Most of the estimated costs are expected to occur due to the listing of Fish Slough milk-vetch and protective measures already in place as a result of the listing of the plant as a threatened species.

The majority of the past and future costs for conservation of the milk-vetch and its habitat are attributable to the Bureau of Land Management. Some of these actions include: modifying impoundments that affect the soil moisture in the plant's habitat, prescribed burning, controlling invasive plants that compete with the Fish Slough milk-vetch, and enforcing off-highway vehicle restrictions.

The economic analysis also projects costs associated with livestock grazing, agricultural activities, recreation, commercial mining, and the exportation of groundwater.

When specifying an area as critical habitat, the Endangered Species Act (ESA) requires the Service to consider economic and other relevant impacts of the designation. If the benefits of excluding an area outweigh the benefits of including it, the Service may exclude an area from critical habitat, unless this would result in the extinction of a threatened or endangered species.

Comments on the draft economic analysis and proposed critical habitat may be submitted to: Field Supervisor, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; Ventura Fish and Wildlife Office, 2493 Portola Road, Suite B, Ventura, CA 93003; or faxed to 805/644-3958. Comments previously submitted on the proposed critical habitat need not be resubmitted as they will be incorporated into the public record as part of this comment period and will be fully considered in preparation of the final rule.

Fish Slough milk-vetch gets its name from an area north of the town of Bishop called Fish Slough. Fish Slough encompasses wetlands, alkali meadows and uplands. The slough – which the Bureau of Land Management classifies as an “Area of Critical Environmental Concern” – is a place where geographic isolation, geology, climate, and hydrology have created a home for several rare species, including the Federally protected Owens pupfish, and a plant species called King’s ivesia.

Fish Slough milk-vetch, a member of the pea family, is a perennial with lavender flowers. Threats faced by the species include: habitat destruction because of off-road vehicle use; cattle grazing; grazing by native animals; competition with non-native plant species; changes in its preferred wetland habitat; and ground water pumping or water diversion activities that alter the hydrology of Fish Slough.

Critical habitat is a term in the ESA that identifies specific geographic areas that are essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and which may require special management considerations. However, a designation does not affect land ownership or establish a refuge, wilderness, reserve, preserve, or other special conservation area. It does not allow government or public access to private lands and does not close areas to all access or use.

In 30 years of implementing the Endangered Species Act, the Service has found that the designation of critical habitat provides little additional protection to most listed species, while preventing the Service from using scarce conservation resources for activities with greater conservation benefits.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 544 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the ESA, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign and Native American tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

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